



ANNUAL REPORT
2020

Table of Contents

2	Welcome
3	Long-Term Commitment to Connecticut
5	2020 Year In Review
9	Rising to the Challenge of COVID-19
17	Connecticut RISE Network
21	Connecticut Opportunity Project
25	Empowering Educators
29	Supporting Students
33	2021 Preview
35	Partners

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WELCOME

Dear Friends and Partners,

2020 has been the most extraordinarily unusual year to say the least. The pandemic shut down schools resulting in a profound burden thrust upon teachers, school leaders, students, and families. The pandemic exacerbated the need for more resources within high-need communities. Due to COVID-19, the tried-and-true teaching strategies of teachers were turned upside down as they had to adapt to the new approach of teaching online. In addition, students also demonstrated tremendous resiliency when they switched over to online learning and the new way of life.

The pandemic caught everyone in the entire state off guard. We never could have envisioned the devastation that affected our daily lives, which presented entirely new problems requiring immediate solutions. This fostered new collaborations to form in unexpected ways. People who had not worked together before suddenly were leaning upon one another to accomplish new goals. We quickly expanded our collaborations with teachers, foundations, union leaders, municipal leaders, and state leaders to address pressing needs.

I am inspired and thankful for the wonderful and generous spirit of Connecticut's school leaders and teachers doing their best to help their students, by all of the municipal leaders working relentlessly to assist their communities, the union leaders working hard to help their teachers, and the foundations' generous support.

Our work would not have been possible without these collaborations and the dedication of our partners, or without the Dalio Education team's commitment and passion for helping disengaged and disconnected young people and supporting programs designed with teachers. A million thanks to our partners for the opportunity to work alongside you, and to my team for all of your hard work!

I hope you find this Annual Report helpful in learning about Dalio Education's strategy, goals, and impact through collaboration - as well as what we intend to continue prioritizing in the years ahead. I am also thrilled to share a selection of stories from our partners in these pages, providing a small testament to their tremendous resiliency, creativity, and dedication.

With deep gratitude,

Barbara

Barbara Dalio
Founder and Director
Dalio Education



Jennifer Straub (L), Principal, and Christine Fenn (R), Counselor at Maloney High School, Meriden.

Dalio Education Strategy

Barbara Dalio started her philanthropic work more than a decade ago in Connecticut. Barbara is deeply committed to the state because it has such potential and is home, where she has raised her family and continues to live. Her early work led her to volunteer at an alternative high school in Norwalk, which furthered her passion for working with teachers and young people who are struggling to succeed in school and life. She saw first-hand how young people who are disengaged or disconnected—meaning that they are at risk of dropping out of high school or have already done so—are often underserved in the traditional system, but that with the right support, they can re-engage and succeed in high school and beyond. She quickly formed relationships with school professionals, found mentors, and hired her first staff person, Andrew Ferguson.

In 2015, Barbara and Andrew initiated a three-pronged strategy that continues to define Barbara’s commitment to Connecticut for the long-term:

1 Create initiatives to advance positive youth outcomes with the intention that the initiatives become legacy institutions that produce social value for decades in the form of measurable improvements achieved in young people’s lives and prospects;



2 Form collaborations to benefit young people and educators in response to identified needs; and



All collaboration partners are featured on the back cover of this report.

3 Support research to generate new insights and deeper understanding, raise public awareness, and inform the initiatives and policymakers.



To advance this long-term strategy, we rely on data and what we continually learn through our direct engagement with educators, youth development professionals, young people, and community leaders. With the insights of those who best understand how to promote positive youth outcomes informing ongoing evolution in our work, we aim to stay responsive to what we are learning as well as to new developments in the broader context within which we all work. Perhaps never has this way of working together been more essential than in 2020.

YEAR IN REVIEW

2020

\$33.4 million invested in 2020 *through grants and direct charitable activities*

As for every other organization across our state, country, and world, the events of 2020 have had a major impact on our work this year. The challenges faced by Connecticut's young people who are struggling the most were even further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, as were the complexities of the work that Connecticut's dedicated educators lead. We moved quickly in 2020 to respond to what we were hearing about needs and opportunities in the wake of the pandemic. But meanwhile, we also continued to advance the work already underway through our major initiatives. The disproportionate impacts of the pandemic only further underscored the importance of our core mission, the scope of the challenges that disengaged and disconnected youth face, and the urgency of strengthening and expanding supports available to help all youth succeed.

Here are highlights demonstrating the investments we made in 2020 and their resulting outputs or outcomes:

\$5.1 Million in the RISE Network and 9 participating school districts

1,300 educators and 14,000 students served, with 84% on track for on-time grade promotion, up from 64% since 2015

9 point increase in graduation rates across the network, bringing the overall graduation rate to 87%

14 point increase in FAFSA completion, up from 51% since 2015

8 point increase in college readiness in Grades 9 through 12, up from 34% since 2015

\$3.1 Million in the Opportunity Project and 3 grantee partners

160 youth-serving non-profit professionals engaged in capacity building to enhance effectiveness

1,160 disengaged or disconnected youth ages 14 to 22 served in core programming designed to produce outcomes

Skills-based cognitive-behavioral curriculum developed for delivery by youth development professionals and made available as an open-source resource on the Opportunity Project's website

\$1.9 Million in Empowering Educators

25,500 educators enrolled in free online course on social and emotional learning

150 schools trained in a systemic approach to social and emotional learning through Yale's Center for Emotional Intelligence

200 fellowships awarded to teachers in support of self-designed professional learning experiences

\$19.6 Million in The Partnership for Connecticut

60,000 laptops distributed to high school students without them in Connecticut's highest-need school districts

\$3.7 Million in Supporting Students

5,500 winter coats donated to families in need across Connecticut

280 students and families provided mental health services through Clifford Beers

Two community collaborations to provide families with access to free, high-speed internet





For the community of public high school educators created through the Connecticut RISE Network, a non-profit organization that we co-founded in 2015, their collaborative relationships and shared practices became even more valuable in 2020. Through the RISE Network, teachers, counselors, school leaders, and district administrators across nine school systems and ten high schools are working together to ensure all students experience success. One-on-one goal-setting conferences for each student and personalized coaching for students who are struggling, informed by the use of data dashboards that enable educators to know and respond to student needs in real time, are part of an array of supports that RISE educators developed and implement network-wide to help keep students on track and improve high school graduation rates. As schools transitioned to virtual learning in the spring, RISE educators leveraged the power of the network to navigate uncharted territory, developing creative ways to maintain quality while shifting to online delivery and management of instruction and student support.



Through the Connecticut Opportunity Project, we invest in and strengthen non-profit organizations working with young people who are struggling the most. In July 2020, David Hunter became Director of the initiative; and under his leadership, we developed a robust 10-year social investment strategy for the Opportunity Project. Among our goals is a commitment to expand the current portfolio of three grantee partners to include a total of six by the end of 2021. We spent the second half of 2020 meeting with community and non-profit leaders across Connecticut and beyond to develop a landscape analysis of prospective grantee partners.

Supported by long-term, general operating grants as well as technical assistance and organizational coaching, grantee partners build their organizational capacity to reach the highest levels of program effectiveness so that they can best help the youth they serve to achieve positive, long-term outcomes that support their agency and self-sufficiency. Knowing that the pandemic was intensifying many of the challenges their young people face, in 2020 our grantee partners - COMPASS, Domus, and Our Piece of the Pie - had to invent systems almost overnight for delivering extra support and resources to help their youth and families to meet essential needs, drawing on additional support from Dalio Education and others—without pausing the delivery of their youth development programming nor their capacity-building work to improve their effectiveness.



We partnered with bipartisan state leaders in 2019 to form a public-private partnership to help struggling young people graduate high school and secure meaningful employment. Unfortunately, this initiative came to an unsuccessful end in 2020, but not before we worked with state and local leaders shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic hit to secure and distribute laptops to 60,000 high school students in Connecticut's highest-need school districts. Dalio Education provided more than \$18 million toward the procurement of these laptops and the state provided an additional \$5 million.

This collaborative effort reached more than 80 high schools and helped spark the launch of Governor Lamont's Everybody Learns Initiative to help close the digital divide in Connecticut.

We learned many important lessons from The Partnership experience. For example, we learned about the challenges inherent in simultaneously building a new non-profit organization while forming a public-private venture involving the state's top bipartisan leaders. We also learned how difficult it is to balance the long-term needs around program design and capacity-building with the short-term expectations that come with public funding.

Dalio Education and its initiatives are now stronger because of these lessons - and many others. We remain committed to the full expenditure of \$100 million in funding that we originally intended to invest through The Partnership for Connecticut in addressing the needs of young people who are disengaged or disconnected, even as the initiatives through which we make these investments change in the years ahead.



Empowering Educators

A core thread of our work continues to be recognizing the heroic work educators do every day and providing opportunities for continuing professional learning based on what they want and know they need. While navigating the many technical challenges accompanying the shift to virtual learning this spring, teachers became increasingly concerned about how the extraordinary uncertainty and stress caused by the pandemic was affecting their students' wellbeing. To support educators in better understanding and managing their students' emotions, as well as their own, we partnered with the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. Through a new online course that we made available for free to all school staff across Connecticut's preK-12 schools, educators can learn social and emotional strategies to promote the well-being of their students while managing their own stress.



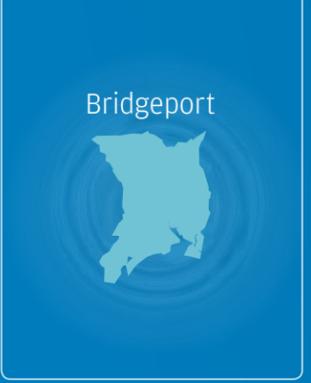
Supporting Students

This year shed light on other crucial opportunities for our continued collaborations with school districts, organizations, and municipalities to help young people in ways that take into account their holistic needs. As schools transitioned to remote learning in March 2020, students without access to technology at home faced enormous barriers to engaging in education. We joined together with the Connecticut Conference of Municipalities (CCM) and local foundations to form collaborations with the cities of Hartford and Norwalk to expand connectivity for tens of thousands of Connecticut families. Together with CCM, we also commissioned a report to help us better understand gaps in access to high-speed internet from a statewide perspective—finding that nearly one in four Connecticut households did not have high-speed internet at home prior to the pandemic, with connectivity deficits falling hardest on low-income households in the state's largest cities as well as on older adults and communities of color. CCM has continued to use this report as a basis for their advocacy.





RISING TO THE CHALLENGE OF COVID-19



A Letter from Sheena Graham

Coming Together as a Community in Bridgeport and Statewide

Being an educator is about who you are, not just what you choose as your profession. No matter what challenges arise, we find ways to engage our students and help them meet success. In this unprecedented time, resiliency is the thread that is holding students, teachers, and our educational system together.

Hybrid educational models—rotating which students are in the building versus learning from home on a given day—are conducive to social distancing, but for young people bring new challenges. Many no longer see their friends, safety protocols restrict their usual movement, bathroom and mask break times are scheduled, and on the high school level, chosen courses are often sacrificed for cohort needs. Yet students remain diligent and positive in the face of the pandemic.

Educators feel like first-year teachers again. The bar is higher than ever for the computer-based approaches we are creating to substitute for hands-on, in-person educational experiences. This undertaking is even more challenging for teachers who have not had access to or are not as experienced with technology. While realizing for some students we must compete for their attention against the distraction of online games

and social media, we respect the fact that for others, their responsibilities in the home have grown. Thus, we work well past school hours, find extra individual time for students needing additional support, deliver educational supplies to homes to facilitate remote learning, and remain determined as ever to meet our students' needs.

Despite these challenges, positives emerge. Relationships between students, their families, educators, and the community are growing stronger. The efforts of Dalio Education, other funders, and state and local leaders to get computers to students without them was a major step toward equity. This created access while affirming to young people, *you and your education matter.*

Overcoming obstacles together has created a tighter bond across all stakeholders statewide that easily crosses traditional boundaries. We recognize that we are interdependent in more ways than we might have previously acknowledged, and more importantly are expressing to each other our mutual respect, appreciation, and gratitude. It is now ingrained even more deeply in all of us that true success for each student happens when we as a community work resiliently together.

“OVERCOMING OBSTACLES TOGETHER HAS CREATED A TIGHTER BOND ACROSS ALL STAKEHOLDERS STATEWIDE... IT IS NOW INGRAINED EVEN MORE DEEPLY IN ALL OF US THAT TRUE SUCCESS FOR EACH STUDENT HAPPENS WHEN WE AS A COMMUNITY WORK RESILIENTLY TOGETHER.”

- Sheena Graham
Performing Arts Teacher, Warren Harding High School
2019 Connecticut Teacher of the Year



A Resilient Response in Hartford

As the COVID-19 pandemic marched across Connecticut in 2020, the city of Hartford was hard hit by COVID deaths, an increase in shootings, and the disappearance of low-wage jobs by the thousand, in a city where 31 percent of residents were already living below the poverty line.

“We’re a community where many families face uncertainty and insecurity all the time. And for that uncertainty and those insecurities to be magnified by the pandemic has had a profound effect on everything and everyone,” said Mayor Luke Bronin.

“The opportunity to seize at this moment is to have a bigger conversation as a state or as a nation about the consequences of concentrated poverty,” he said. “We have, partly by accident and partly by design, allowed for a very stark sorting and segregation both racially and socioeconomically in our country and here in Connecticut.”

Amid that broader conversation, community and city leaders sprang into action to meet essential needs for stable housing, food, and healthcare. In looking at the needs of young people, that translated into ensuring all 20,000 of Hartford’s public-school students had laptop computers, funded in part by Dalio Education, as well as committing to expand internet connectivity to every household and business in Hartford. Costs for the new, free citywide Wi-Fi are shared among Dalio Education, the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, and the City.

“Right now, we need to move quickly and in big ways to reach young people who are out of the classroom and find ways to keep them connected—not just to school, but to their plans, their ambitions, their aspirations for the future,” said Bronin. “It can’t all be done by the school system. It’s a collaboration between schools, youth-serving organizations, and funders.”

“THE THING THAT KEEPS ME UP AT NIGHT THE MOST IS THE IMPACT ON YOUNG PEOPLE IN OUR CITY. WE NEED TO MAKE SURE THAT WE ARE NOT LETTING AN ENTIRE GRADUATING CLASS OR TWO BECOME CASUALTIES OF THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC.”

- Hartford Mayor Luke Bronin



“THE PANDEMIC FORCED US TO REIMAGINE EDUCATION OVERNIGHT. OUR THEORY OF ACTION IS, IF WE BUILD CAPACITY TO DELIVER INSTRUCTION IN INNOVATIVE AND ADAPTIVE WAYS, THE OUTCOMES FROM TEACHING WILL BE BETTER.”

– Dr. Michael Conner
Superintendent of
Middletown Public Schools



Putting Innovation to Work in Middletown

Graduation rates have been climbing skyward at Middletown High School in recent years, to an all-time high of 97 percent. Superintendent Michael Conner credits a data-focused series of interventions adopted in recent years, such as closely tracking attendance and performance to identify potential struggles early in a student's career and using technology to tailor instruction to individual student needs.

“We have been pursuing an aggressive agenda of purposeful and intentional disruption,” said Conner, whose district is part of the innovation-focused RISE Network co-founded by Dalio Education in 2015.

Sudden, long-term school closures would seem to threaten that momentum. But Middletown's innovation agenda has served it well in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Students were already skilled in working in digital classrooms, since Middletown had laptops and iPads for every student in school, partially supported by Dalio Education. Teachers were well-versed in using data and adaptive educational software to flip their classrooms, letting students master new material at home and use class-time for groupwork and discussion.

Like many districts in Connecticut, Middletown responded quickly to ensure students could continue learning at home. The district prepared computers and internet hotspots to send home with any student who was not fully connected. Teachers completed

four days of professional learning to deepen their expertise in using digital instructional tools, and school was up and running remotely within a week of building closures in March 2020. The level of instruction stayed relatively steady, with no reports of widespread learning loss throughout the spring or over the summer, Conner said.

In the fall, the high school returned on a hybrid schedule, with a combination of live and asynchronous instruction. Every Wednesday, teachers participate in professional learning to enhance their remote-teaching skills. Still, the longer the pandemic lasts, the larger the potential for interrupted progress looms. Closing racial gaps in academic achievement remains an urgent goal. And nationwide and locally, as the pandemic approaches the 12-month mark, “there is a COVID slide,” Conner said.

“Our teachers have been phenomenal, but there are really not baseline metrics to assess where students are and how much progress they've made,” he said. “How do we truly measure the quality of instruction in this environment? Are there gaps, and are they growing?”

Still, the speed with which pandemic-related closures have forced schools everywhere to change how they operate may have positive consequences as well—especially for students who were not thriving under the status quo.

“We often talk in a conceptual or theoretical matter about personalized learning, design thinking, and entrepreneurship,” said Conner. “But it wasn't really happening at scale. March 13, 2020, created that atmosphere where now, applied creativity and innovation, entrepreneurship, and imagination are warranted. And that change was needed.”

Cultivating Connection in New London

In Lisa Marien's elementary school music classroom, students are often playing active song-based games. They might stand in a circle and sing to one another while holding hands or partner up for a shared song while passing a ball back and forth. This type of interactive, kinesthetic learning is fun, and it builds trusting communities of young learners in person. But on video or in person under a mask, it's all but impossible.

"Almost every activity I would normally do to teach a concept has to be completely re-designed, or scrapped," she said. "Although I can still 'teach music' from a cognitive standpoint, the social-emotional learning that makes music time so rich and life-sustaining is all but lost."

Marien and her colleagues at Nathan Hale Arts Magnet School in New London are working overtime to spark creativity and maintain

New London



connections amid rolling building closures and virtual learning. About one-third of New London students attend school remotely from home every day. The rest attend school in shifts, with two days onsite and three days at home each week, so long as rates of infection are low enough to allow in-person learning. Instruction has to meet these many, fast-changing circumstances.

Keeping all 540 of the school's K-5 students engaged under these conditions is not easy. Marien, for example, prepares custom videos for each of her lessons and often sings stories on camera, building on her skills as a seasoned jazz performer to capture and hold students' attention. Still, logistics can get in the way. In the fall, she noticed that a typically enthusiastic third-grader was not completing her assignments. After a few back-and-forth messages, Marien realized that her video lessons weren't reaching the student, because the girl's home internet service was too weak to play them. "She is so bright, so capable, and so willing—and she's got this roadblock that is not her own causing," said Marien. She contacted the school's social worker to help the family access free broadband service. And the student wrote a song and uploaded a video of her singing it for her teacher.

Teachers everywhere have similar stories of going above and beyond. In addition to troubleshooting logistical problems, they are building the sort of

caring, trusting, and fun relationships that propel elementary learning. Special education teacher Colleen Delaporta-Wells has regular small-group video meetings with her students outside of class, to make space for open-ended chats that allow them to get to know one another, including the types of extra supports they may need at home.

"The district did a phenomenal job in making sure every student had their technology," she said. "But we still have to get kids to log in and learn. There are many families that are part of our school community who, as much as they would say that their child's education is important, have far greater and more immediate concerns than whether or not she is logged in to do her writing assignment. They are worried about, are we going to make rent this month? Who will watch her when I go to work?"

It's a stress-making situation for families and teachers alike. Educators want to do right by their students, but identifying what that means for individual children under fast-changing circumstances is difficult and complex.

"We're reaching out every which way we can," said Delaporta-Wells. "We're calling, emailing, setting up Zoom chats with families, passing messages to social workers and school psychologists, just trying to figure out whatever needs are not being met. And then we are just forgiving ourselves. Who trained for this? Whose background has ever included teaching in a global pandemic? This is all new territory."

“THIS IS AN EMERGENCY SITUATION, AND WE ARE ALL ADULTS. WE CAN DO WHAT WE NEED TO DO. BUT NOW IT'S NINE, 10 MONTHS LATER. I THINK THAT WE ALL ARE PAINFULLY AWARE THAT TEACHERS CAN ONLY DO IT THIS WAY FOR SO LONG.”

– Lisa Marien
Music Teacher at Nathan Hale Arts
Magnet School, New London



Staying the Course in Meriden

On a chilly November Tuesday, 100 freshman students and families gathered outside Maloney High School in Meriden. For some, it was the first time they had ever stepped foot on campus. Masked counselors and school leaders waved broadly as they welcomed families, auctioned off gift cards, and handed out Thanksgiving-ready pies. They also talked up graduation requirements, “on-track” status, afterschool credit-recovery programs, and the in-depth counseling services on offer. Every student left with a folder of information, including a QR code to seamlessly contact their guidance counselor with a cellphone camera, and a “Class of 2024” t-shirt.

Pandemic or not, the clock is ticking for 9th-graders. Freshman year is an especially vulnerable time for students, who are most likely to become disengaged and disconnected amid the tough transition from middle to high school.

“If I can keep my freshmen engaged until sophomore year, they have virtually no issues as juniors or seniors,” said Maloney Principal Jennifer Straub. “But the whole concept of earning credits and making sure you have enough for graduation is a heavy lift for a 14-year-old. We engage them, connect them to the school, build positive relationships, and show them that hard work pays off four years down the road.”

The “Thankful Tuesday” event was part of a longstanding focus on the 9th grade transition in Meriden Public Schools, one of nine urban districts in the Connecticut RISE Network. Co-founded by Dalio Education in 2015, RISE provides a host of supports, such as data analysis and technical assistance, professional learning opportunities, and a community of school leaders who share strategies to ensure all students earn a high-school diploma. The network also supports two additional counselors for each partner high school—9th-grade transition specialists who are assigned small caseloads of at-risk students. Counselors and school leaders have developed creative ways to connect students and families to the school early on, such as a summer school program for incoming freshman to get a jump start on 9th grade, September pizza party for families, and in-person on-track meetings.

Those efforts have paid off: the percentage of Maloney freshmen who are promoted to 10th grade on time is now 97 percent, compared to 74 percent in 2012-13 school year. From there, students typically go on to graduate on time. But many of those trusted outreach tools are unavailable in a pandemic, with students attending school half-time or learning remotely at home. In addition, many Maloney families are contending with housing and food insecurity, Straub said.

And so, before learning could even begin, district and school leaders had to master logistics like distributing food, bringing students' technology online, and restructuring building rules to promote social distancing. While those were relatively straightforward, thornier challenges like engaging students not attending school onsite, establishing equitable grading rules during a pandemic, and setting reasonable expectations for parental support are more challenging. And at the core of those efforts is resetting daily duties and expectations for a staff of over 100—a behind-the-scenes management challenge that Straub said was achievable thanks to years of professional learning, data analysis, and practice through the RISE Network.

Teachers and counselors are focused on “creative solutions” to whatever challenges students face this year, said Christine Fenn, a 9th-grade transition specialist. Maloney is offering after-school tutoring for students who have gotten off to a slow start, with

different learning cohorts scheduled for different days. On Halloween, counselors and 9th-grade teachers hosted “Get It Done Saturday,” a make-up session for freshmen in danger of failing a class. One student, a remote learner who had never been in the building, started the day with failing grades in three classes and brought her Algebra grade up from a 20 to a passing 65 in the space of a few hours, Fenn said.

Remote students are especially struggling, said Fenn, because many of them are supervising younger siblings during school, while parents are at work. Through RISE, Fenn and her colleagues regularly consult real-time data about student attendance and academic performance and target support, like calls home or teacher conferences, right away. RISE school support staff also created assignment trackers for remote students at a teacher's request to help students stay on top of their workload.

About 90 percent of this year's freshman class was on track at the end of the first marking period, which is lower than usual, said Fenn. But creative supports are bringing more students up to speed, with counselors now regularly showing up in classroom breakout rooms on Google Meet to foster connection, holding open-door office hours every afternoon for academic or tech

support, and more than 50 home visits by the principal to make contact with the families that, so far, have been hardest to reach.

“The collaborative with the RISE Network keeps the work moving,” said Straub. “No matter what else you are tackling, it always brings you back to: what is the opportunity for the kids?”

97%

**of Maloney High School
freshmen promoted on
time to 10th grade**

“WHILE IT SOMETIMES FEELS LIKE I'M A COVID DIRECTOR, THE BOTTOM LINE IS THAT THIS IS A SCHOOL. ON-TRACK MATTERS. AFTER FOUR YEARS, DOORS OF OPPORTUNITY HAVE TO BE OPEN FOR OUR STUDENTS, AND THAT ONLY HAPPENS IF WE PREPARE THEM WELL.”

**– Jennifer Straub
Principal of Maloney High School, Meriden**





In a Crisis, Keeping Focus on the Future in Stamford

Brian Gonzalez has a hard-won treasure on prominent display in his Stamford bedroom: a high-school diploma. He's the first member of his family to graduate and the first to enroll in college, and he wants his 6-year-old brother Brandon to do the same.

"My little brother, he looks up to me," said Gonzalez, 18. "Everything I do, I know he is watching. Now I'm in college, a high-school graduate. What do you think he is going to do when he gets older?"

Just a few months before, his future seemed less sure. Gonzalez had been on track to graduate from Stamford High School until the pandemic hit. His mother, the breadwinner at home, was laid off from her job as a hotel housekeeper. His sister and her two young daughters fled New York to shelter with the family in Connecticut. The entire household became ill, quarantining one at a time in Gonzalez's bedroom as they slowly recovered and finally tested negative for COVID-19. To keep the family afloat, Gonzalez picked up

extra shifts at his after-school job at a local burrito restaurant. When the restaurant closed in May, he set up a makeshift haircutting business on a friend's porch, using his home clippers to trim as many as 14 clients a day. His online high-school coursework faded into the background.

"I wasn't really focused on school at that moment," he said. "I couldn't communicate with my teachers and I was worried about what is going to happen with the rent, the cable bill, the car bill. Everybody had lost their jobs. I had to think of ways to make money."

All the while, phone calls and texts from Chris Arenas kept coming. Arenas, co-director of the Domus Knights youth development program, had been working with Gonzalez for the past three years with a singular goal: graduate high school and move on to college or career training. Keeping focus on the long term is often a challenge for students from vulnerable families,

“OUR WORK IS ALL ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIPS AND TRUST WE BUILD WITH OUR STUDENTS. WE PUSH THEM IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION EVERY DAY, AND THEY KNOW WE WILL MAKE SURE THEY HAVE WHATEVER THEY NEED TO BE SUCCESSFUL.”

– Chris Arenas
Co-Director, Domus Knights



CONNECTICUT

OPPORTUNITY PROJECT

where immediate needs for money, safety, and security can crowd out slow-moving, incremental progress in school. When the pandemic caused simultaneous health and financial crises for already stressed families overnight, “the challenges were endless,” said Mike Duggan, Executive Director of Domus Kids.

A longstanding community-based service provider, Domus focuses on connecting disengaged and disconnected young people with educational and career-development opportunities. In the spring, however, that mission meant meeting family’s immediate needs for food, cash assistance, school supplies, and connectivity support. The agency launched a rapid, wide-ranging response, distributing weekly bags of groceries and \$500 mini-grants, paying outstanding cable bills so families could sign up for free broadband access, and scouring big-box stores for toilet paper, masks, and hand sanitizer to distribute.

But those interventions were all oriented toward the key education and workforce outcomes it seeks to advance. Domus is a member organization of the Connecticut Opportunity Project, an initiative of Dalio Education, which provides youth-serving organizations with financial and technical support.

“The Opportunity Project really has helped us focus on how we serve this group of disconnected and disengaged young people,” said Duggan. “What are the behaviors that will get us to our target outcomes? What activities will help our young people be successful?”

Through the Opportunity Project, Domus has pared down its work over the past two years to focus on just those interventions that have the greatest impact on the young people it serves. That meant closing down two charter schools and a community center and investing in its most promising models: direct support for young people aged 12 to 25, aimed at keeping them

connected to school or the workplace, and easing community re-entry with a future-minded plan for young people leaving prison.

Its school-based program, Domus Knights, serves about 200 high-school students at Stamford High School, all of whom are at risk of dropping out. In the fall of 2020, the program expanded to Westhill High School, Stamford’s other comprehensive high school, launching with an initial cohort of 50 9th grade students there. The program’s youth development professionals, called Family Advocates, work onsite at the schools, meeting weekly with students face-to-face and serving as advocates, problem-solvers, and cheerleaders. Some 80 percent of students are promoted to the next grade on time.

The program has become “sharper” since Domus joined the Opportunity Project, Arenas said.

“With the Opportunity Project, we know what our target is, who we are going after, and how we can help these kids,” he said. “We have our model and we are successful with it.”

In Gonzalez’s case, that meant keeping focused on finishing high school and moving on to a post-secondary program, even in a pandemic. Arenas, himself a graduate of Stamford High School, built on his longstanding relationship with Gonzalez and Domus’s authentic response to family needs to encourage the high-school senior to earn his diploma.

“We had three years of building a relationship and trust in me and in Domus,” Arenas said. “I just gave him quick reminders that we had never let him down, we are here to help, we will help you provide for your family and do your schoolwork too. And then he saw that in action, he saw that when Domus said we will provide food for your family, we did. And that lifted the burden off of him and allowed him to focus on getting his schoolwork done.”

In June, Gonzalez realized his last chance to graduate high school on time was slipping away—in part, he said fondly, because “Chris was yelling at me every day to get online and just do it.” He put down his clippers, closed the bedroom door, and spent four long days at his computer to make up the rest of his credits. Gonzalez graduated and was accepted into another Domus program, Work & Learn, where he decided to pursue a Certified Nursing Assistant certificate that will qualify him for jobs paying \$25 an hour.

With agency support, he enrolled at Housatonic Community College in December.

“Domus helped me so much,” he said. “All my scrubs were paid for, I got my physical done, my paperwork for school, everything. It helps so much because you don’t feel alone, doing these things. If it wasn’t for Domus, I would not have graduated on time and I would not be where I am right now. Having someone tell me constantly that I can do it, it’s everything.”

Mike Duggan
Executive Director, Domus

80%
of Domus Knights
students promoted
to the next
grade on time



Fostering Social and Emotional Health Across Connecticut

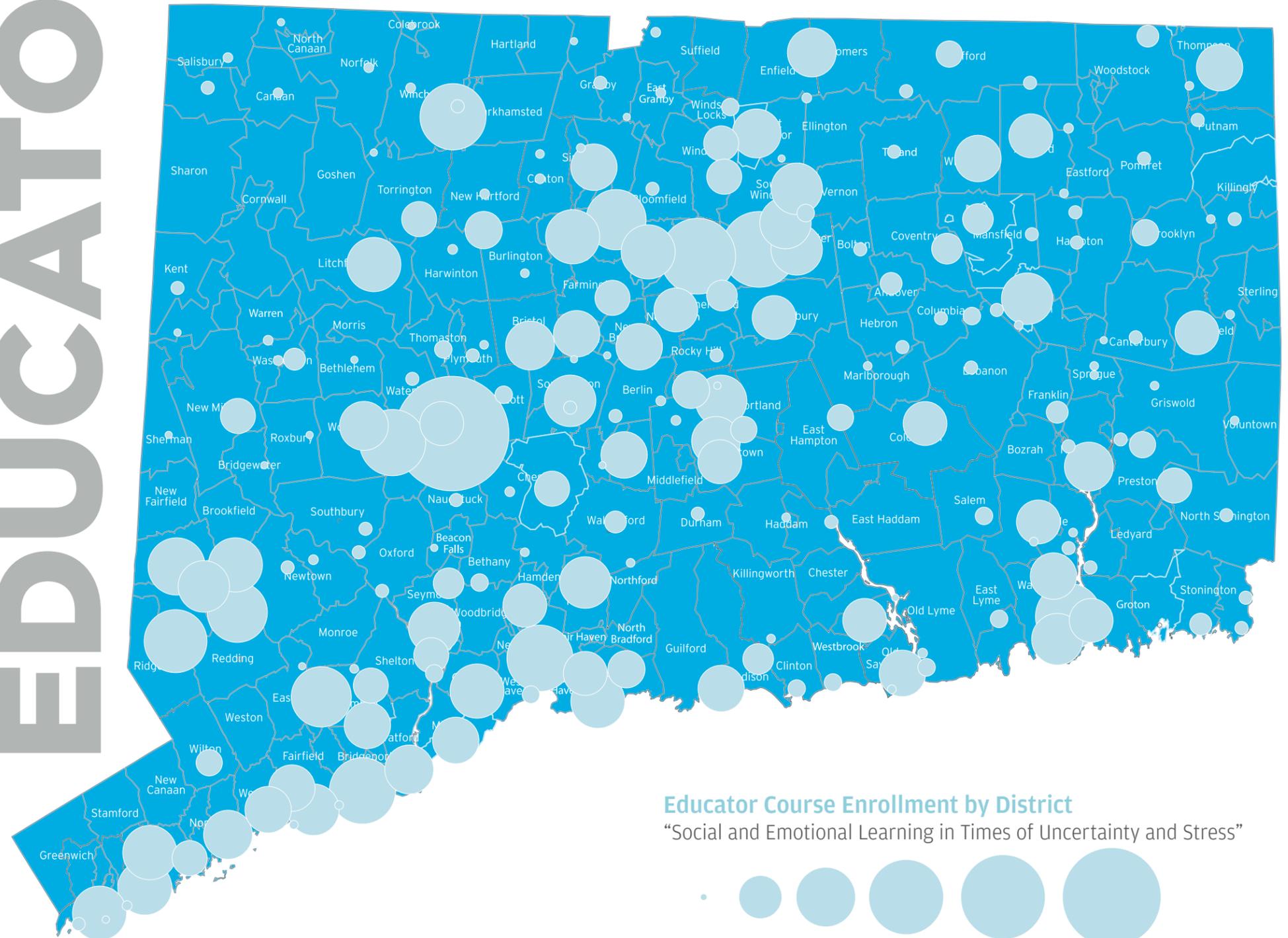
The emotional burdens of a long, uncertain pandemic have been heavy for students and teachers alike. Yet as caring adults committed to keeping students on track, teachers are mission-bound to remain steady and supportive no matter what challenges they or their communities face.

For middle-school Spanish teacher Cristiaan Aguilar, that means keeping things as normal as possible—whether he’s teaching alone in front of a computer screen or in a classroom, masked and at a distance. No matter what, he said, a teacher’s job is to keep kids connected.

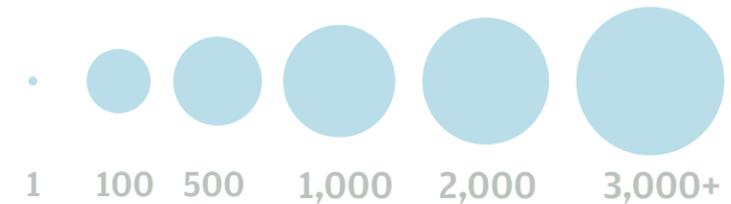
“We might not be in charge of everything that is coming our way, yet we’re still here,” he said. “And that means you are still in school, you are still talking with Mr. Aguilar, and he’s still telling his awful jokes. We are still together. That continuance of structure helps them ground themselves and get a hold of what they can control: their homework, their time, how they connect to others.”

Aguilar is bringing that same sense of perspective to his life both at work and at home, he said, after completing “Social and Emotional Learning in Times of Uncertainty and Stress,” a new online course developed by the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence in partnership with state education and teachers union leaders and Dalio Education.

EMPOWERING EDUCATORS



Educator Course Enrollment by District
“Social and Emotional Learning in Times of Uncertainty and Stress”



570

New London educators
enrolled in online course

“THINGS HAVE TURNED UPSIDE DOWN FOR MY STUDENTS. THEIR PARENTS ARE TRYING TO FIGURE OUT IF THEY HAVE A JOB. THEY ARE TRYING TO FIGURE OUT IF THEY ARE SAFE AT HOME OR AT SCHOOL. BUT I HAVE THE ABILITY TO SET A POSITIVE TONE WITH THEM, TO HELP THEM PUT THINGS INTO PERSPECTIVE AND ADOPT A POSITIVE MINDSET.”

– Cristiaan Aguilar
Spanish Teacher at
Bennie Dover Jackson Middle School,
New London

WELCOME
New London
CENTRO DE
Escuelas Públicas
HOURS: 8:00am - 4:00pm



“It put into perspective the variables that I work within, and what I can and what I cannot control,” he said. “As a teacher, I want to be in charge of my classroom. But in the situation we’re in, the variables and the constraints are beyond our control. So we have to have a different take on what we do. It may not be exactly the way we like it or the way we want it. But what we do in this context, how we teach, live, interact with our students, that’s up to us.”

Dalio Education’s grant to Yale made the course available at no cost to all preK-12 Connecticut educators, as part of a longstanding commitment to teachers’ professional and personal development, with a focus on social-emotional learning. Dalio Education believes in the transformative power of teachers to inform, inspire, and uplift their students, and is motivated by the knowledge that social and emotional development is a critical driver of both student and teacher success.

“The idea for the course started through a conversation with union leaders, who shared their worries about the stress teachers were experiencing. We wanted to do something practical to support them,” said Barbara Dalio. “We brought state leaders and our partners at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence into the conversation, and everybody came together so fast around the idea for the course as a way to help teachers take care of themselves and their students during such a challenging time.”

“Research shows that where there is an emotionally skilled adult present, students focus more, disrupt less, and perform better academically,” said Marc Brackett, the founder and director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. “These adults also have lower levels of stress and burnout, fewer intentions to leave the profession, greater job satisfaction, and more engaging classrooms.”

These insights resonated with educators throughout the New London Public Schools. “We cannot support the social-emotional health of students if we don’t address it for teachers,” said Carrie Rivera, school psychologist department head. “I’ve heard a lot of positive feedback from staff ranging from, ‘I’ve never taken time to stop and think about how my emotions and self-regulation impact my own learning,’ to how they are applying this to their own students and children.”

For Aguilar, managing stress and keeping balance takes the form of regular practice sessions in front of his piano. After taking the course, he vowed to take “specific time for myself, to decompress and make sure I am re-energized,” he said. “It’s a conscious and willing break. No one else is going to do it for me.”

He also cues his students to take small check-in breaks to reflect on their feelings, carve out time to participate in favorite activities, or simply visualize a sunny day at the beach if they need a boost. The course provided “a very tangible way to assess myself and teach students to do the same,” he said. “It speaks to the importance of reaching within before reaching out.”



Expanding Connectivity Statewide

Antonio Xum Gutierrez is a straight-A student at West Rocks Middle School in Norwalk who plans to study engineering in college. But whenever schools are closed due to COVID-19, he has to miss his favorite class, math. That's when his 8-year-old brother Xavi takes a turn using their mother's cellphone hotspot, which the boys share throughout the day to connect to remote school. Meanwhile, their older brother Freddy and sister Saidy use their personal cellphones to log into virtual classes at Norwalk High School.

"The phone only allows one computer at a time, so my brother goes first and I go second," said Antonio, 13, speaking in Spanish. "Sometimes when my math teacher is explaining the assignment, I miss that part."

service at the outset of the pandemic. City leaders and a group of funders, led by Dalio Education, joined together to provide a year of free broadband service to 220 families, along with digital literacy coaching and additional social-services support, and to connect 258 students to free public Wi-Fi. Dalio Education also is supporting a larger-scale effort to expand connectivity in Hartford, with the goal of providing free, citywide Wi-Fi.

"We knew we had equity issues in Norwalk, but then that March 13th date hit," said Ralph Valenzisi, chief of digital learning and development. "The flashlight could not have been shined more clearly this year. We need to look at the whole child."

SUPPORTING STUDENTS

The overarching challenges posed by a global, unpredictable, and deadly pandemic can feel vast and overwhelming. But for many children, it's the workaday practicalities that can knock their studies off-course. Antonio's big sister Saidy, a sophomore who plays on the high school soccer team and wants to be an architect, said her home internet service made a big difference in her attendance and her grades.

Using her cellphone to connect is hard, she said. "We are trying to do our assignments and the internet just doesn't work. I hand in my work late, but sometimes the teachers deduct points. My grades can go down."

In Norwalk, an estimated 7-8 percent of families lacked access to reliable, high-quality internet

"One of the most urgent and immediate needs we were hearing about from all of our school and district partners was that many students lacked the devices and internet access that are essential for participating in remote or hybrid education," said Barbara Dalio. "We knew we had to act quickly in response, working together with other foundations and city, state, and educational leaders."

With the support of Dalio Education, Norwalk Public Schools updated, replaced, and added new computers to its supply, providing every student and teacher in the district with a device to take home. Still, attendance was a problem—in the spring, some 7 percent of students were absent each day. At Norwalk High School, the absentee rate among English Language Learners like the

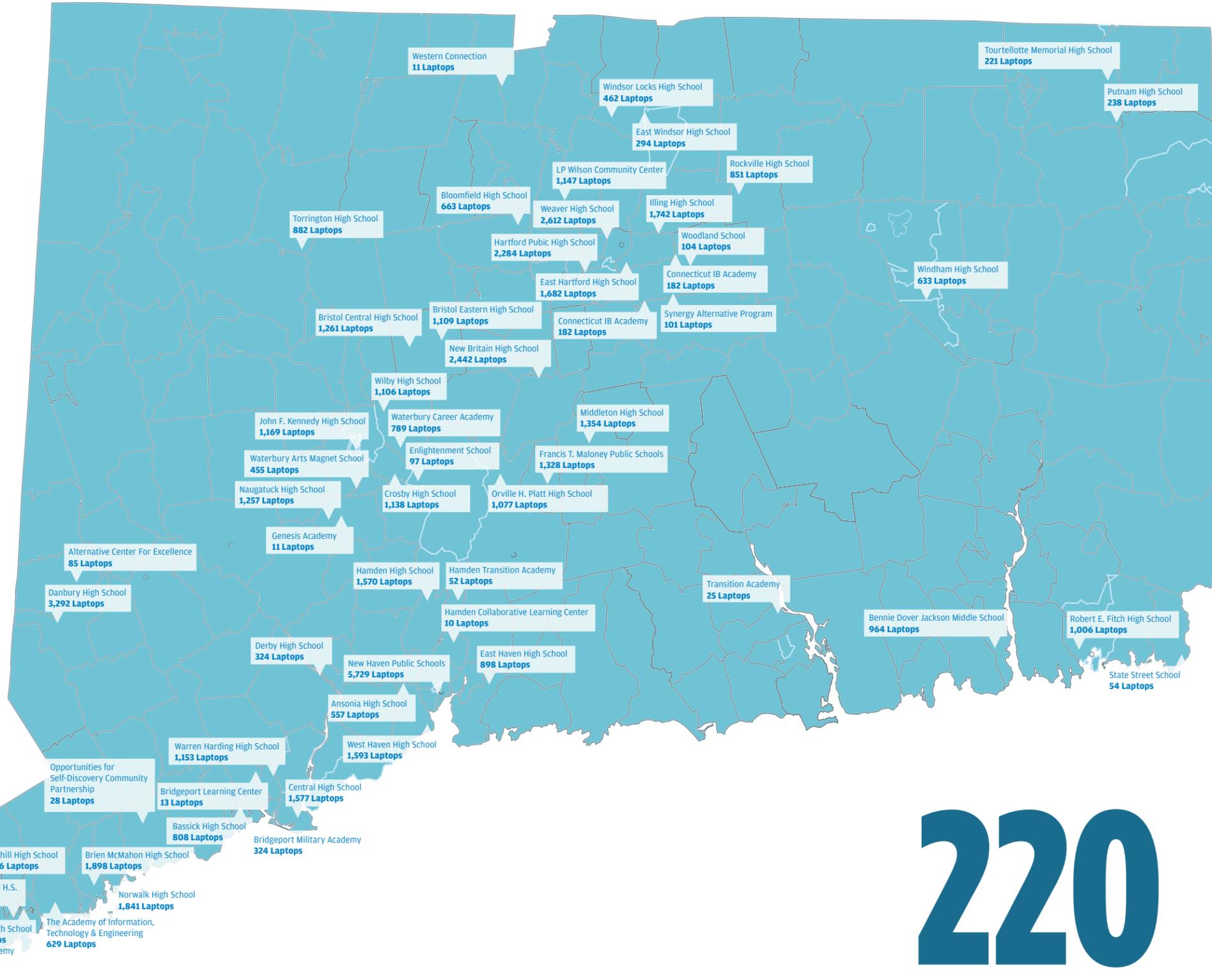
IT'S BETTER WHEN WE HAVE INTERNET IN THE HOUSE BECAUSE I CAN BE ON TIME TO MY CLASSES AND DO MY HOMEWORK WITHOUT ANY PROBLEMS. WHEN I HAVE TO USE MY PHONE, IT'S REALLY SLOW. SOMETIMES I GET MARKED ABSENT OR I CAN'T HEAR THE TEACHER BECAUSE THE AUDIO DOESN'T WORK.

- Fredy Antony Xum Gutierrez
10th grade student at
Norwalk High School



The Gutierrez Family
Left to Right: Antonio, Saidy, Freddy,
Doris (mom), Denise (baby), Xavi

60,000 LAPTOPS DISTRIBUTED TO CONNECTICUT STUDENTS



220
Norwalk families
connected to free internet

Gutierrez children, who moved to Connecticut from Guatemala last year, was around 30 percent, according to Carola Osses, the English Language Learner Department chair.

School counselors surveyed families and found the overwhelming issue was a lack of reliable internet access at home, which inspired the connectivity initiative. Students had hotspots, but they were prone to glitching and sudden drops in service. The district also staffed a new digital learning department and added a bilingual online helpdesk.

“We didn’t want to just email students assignments and have them submit their work. We were looking to do live instruction, which means streaming video back and forth on a regular basis,” said Valenzisi. “And to do that, to keep students engaged and connected, they need to have higher-quality access than just a cellphone.”

For the Gutierrez family, the start of the school year went relatively smoothly: new broadband internet was installed in their home in August, and most of the children were attending school in-person at least part of the time through most of the fall.

“The internet was really useful,” the children’s mother, Doris Gutierrez Guzman, said in Spanish. “Having good grades, finishing school and graduating, this is the big goal.”

Then in October, the family moved to a new home without broadband service. And in November, as the number of virus cases grew, Norwalk started closing more of its school buildings. It was nearly Thanksgiving when the children started to miss class and hand in some assignments late, because slower, less reliable connections meant they were constantly knocked offline. Fredy, 16, said that although he finds it difficult to concentrate at home, having fast internet service makes all the difference.

“I learn more in school, because it’s more distracting at home,” he said. “Without internet my grades started to go down.”

Counselors eventually learned that the family no longer had reliable internet service at home and arranged to have the service installed at their new address in December.

“These students are very resilient—they will try to figure things out, they don’t want to bother anyone to ask,” said Osses. “But the broadband is just a tremendous opportunity for them. We know now that we can actually teach effectively through remote learning. Having the ability to use remote platforms and the ability for all students to join and continue in school, without having a gap in their education, it’s just so valuable. Hotspots can work sometimes, but they just can’t replace broadband.”

2021 PREVIEW

As we look to the year ahead, we will continue to stay nimble in responding to emergent needs so that we can always act on the most promising opportunities to support educators and help young people to succeed. These efforts will take shape around the work we will continue to advance through our two major, long-term initiatives.

Selected highlights of key priorities in 2021 include the following:

Expand the total number of grantee partners from three to six under the current 10-year social investment strategy.

Launch a blue ribbon advisory group to guide the initiative forward in pursuit of its mission, comprised of Sam Cobbs, CEO of Tipping Point; Gordon Berlin, former President of MDRC; and Carol Thompson Cole, President and CEO of Venture Philanthropy Partners.

Initiate planning for a pilot project with a theory of change that links young adults who are disconnected to social enterprises, then apprenticeships, and subsequent full-time employment that supports their agency and self-sufficiency.

Support grantee partners in monitoring the number of disengaged or disconnected youth enrolled in active service slots by grantee organizations, in which young people receive the full range and amount of services that will help them achieve positive outcomes that improve their lives and prospects.

Engagement: Deepen engagement with school communities, including students, families, and educators across RISE high schools and districts. Elevate student voices, educator expertise, and family perspectives to advance shared student outcome goals.

College and Career Readiness: Build on our strong foundation improving Grade 9 on-track achievement. Focus on strategies to ensure all students graduate with a plan, and the skills and confidence to achieve that plan for college, career, and life success.

COVID-19 Innovations: Continue to support school communities in navigating COVID-19 complexities and pursuing creative ideas to promote engagement and on-track achievement. Embrace this moment to reimagine teaching and learning post-pandemic.

Research and Dissemination: Pursue research questions to unlock new insights and strengthen policies, practices, and programming. Seek to share resources, tools, and findings with educators in and beyond the RISE Network.





Dalio Education is proud to partner with and work alongside the following school districts and organizations in pursuit of a shared vision to build a Connecticut that supports every educator and loves every young person, helping everyone to reach their greatest potential.



PARTNERS



Lincoln Center

